

‘Real people in Real Times’

Questions lead to local man’s unique take on Irish history

Published: Friday, February 20, 2015

By Karin Beery
Contributing Writer



David McDonnell is shown in front of Dunluce Castle in County Antrim, Northern Ireland. McDonnell's love of history led him to write "Clan Donnell," a collection of true stories that tell the story of one Irish clan. Courtesy photo.

TORCH LAKE – Irish-American David McDonnell grew up with a love for Irish and American history. An attorney by trade, McDonnell wrote several brief family histories before publishing his first book, "ClanDonnell: A Storied History of Ireland."

Unlike most history books, which simply recount dates and information, "ClanDonnell" tells the story of an Irish clan through a collection of true stories. McDonnell hopes the format will appeal to everyone and not just history buffs.

A Detroit native and former attorney, McDonnell and his wife spent years vacationing in northern Michigan before relocating to Torch Lake Township after their retirement. Throughout the years he researched and wrote histories of his family to help him answer two questions.

"I asked myself two simple questions," he said. "Why is my last name McDonnell? And why was I born an American?"

As he researched and answered those questions for himself, McDonnell realized that other Irish-Americans asked the same questions. That inspired him to write "ClanDonnell: A Storied History of Ireland," a collection of true stories that tells the story of the Donnell clan.

"There are no other books on Ireland written this way," he said. "History is often written by historians for historians and is far too dry and factual for most readers. I wrote the book as a collection of stories about real people in real times. The reader will learn a lot about Irish history, but as a context for the stories."

When McDonnell started researching for his book, he was surprised at how easy it was to find the information he needed.

“Many original sources and ancient texts have been digitized and can be reviewed on a laptop,” said McDonnell. “I spent many hours in libraries in America and Ireland, but much of the information was found in the comfort of my home office.”

Though the information was relatively easy to access, McDonnell had to put on his detective’s hat to fit many of the stories together.

“I often found a short mention of something in one source and a short mention of something else in another. Realizing the two were related, I connected a lot of dots and had many “ah-ha” moments.”

After finding everything he needed, however, he still had to put it together. That process turned out to be the most difficult part. He didn’t want to just write the clan’s history, he wanted to write it in a way that most people would enjoy.

“The biggest challenge was converting a mountain of research and information in a way which would be enjoyable to read,” said McDonnell. “Much of what people think they know about the Ireland of our ancestors is wide of the mark. My hope for the book is simply for many people to read and enjoy it, and learn more about Ireland.”

McDonnell is already working on his next book – a historical novel – but he hasn’t moved past “ClanDonnell,” winner of three national book awards. The author will be at the Elk Rapids Historical Museum at 3 p.m. on Saturday, Feb. 28 for an afternoon of Irish storytelling. It will also kick off his St. Patrick’s Day book and storytelling hour.

For more information on David McDonnell and “ClanDonnell: A Storied History of Ireland,” contact McDonnell at clandonnell@gmail.com, or visit www.clandonnell.net.

Karin Beery is a freelance writer, editor and coach. Contact her at Karin@karinbeery.com.